Psychology of a Conquistador

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1. Background

„Die gefährlichste Weltanschauung ist die Weltanschauung derer, die die Welt nie angeschaut haben.“

[The most dangerous worldview is the worldview of those who have not viewed the world.]

Alexander von Humboldt

Philipp von Hutten (1505–1546) was a German conquistador who sailed to Venezuela in 1534 hoping to make a fortune and to return with honor. It did not work out as planned. After two unsuccessful expeditions into the continent’s interior, but without having admitted defeat, von Hutten was beheaded by a Spanish rival and impostor. What went wrong?

Von Hutten had great promise. He was the scion of a family of proud and vigorous imperial knights. One of his elder relatives was Ulrich von Hutten, the noted humanist and forerunner of the German reformation. Like other members of his caste, Philipp received a thorough education in letters and the martial arts. His ethics was dominated by a sense of honor and independence, which was part of his heritage. Times were changing, however. The Middle Ages had ended, and the caste of knights was being eclipsed in importance by a new class of merchants and bankers. The Fugger and Welser families of Augsburg had financed the ascension of Charles V to the thrones of Germany and Spain, and they commanded a huge network of trade routes in his empire in which the sun wouldn’t set. Indeed, during this era of the Renaissance, adventurers and privateers like Hernán Cortés or

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Francisco Pizarro were becoming an anachronism; they still got rich the old-fashioned way, by armed robbery. Von Hutten may have met these living legends, but there is no proof that he did. Nonetheless, he must have been familiar with their stories, and their astonishing successes probably inspired him.

When Charles V granted the Welser Company a virtually free hand to mount expeditions to exploit the area that came to be known as Venezuela, von Hutten saw his chance. He was not part of the first expedition (1529), nor was he in command of the next, but he had the contacts that landed him a commission as Captain General or senior officer. In 1534 he sailed among a force of 600 mercenaries to South America via the Canary Islands and several stops in the Caribbean.

2. Method

The goal of this essay is to shed light on a particular aspect of Hutten’s story, namely his decision to remain in South America when the evidence before him suggested that the prospects of success were slim. The main source for this retrospective psychological analysis is a book by E. Schmitt & F. K. von Hutten (1996), which contains a historical introduction to the life and times of Philipp von Hutten as well as reproductions of his travelogue (“Neue Zeytung”) and several of his letters.

These documents are reproduced in the book in their original pre-Lutheran German prose. The English-language quotes used in the present essay are translations that I have attempted. Rendering von Hutten in English required the dual steps of translating Renaissance German into Modern German and then translating Modern German into English. In the spirit of caution, and not being a professional translator, I ask the reader to treat the quotes as paraphrastic rather than literal.

To give a sense of the ambiguities I faced when reading von Hutten in his original voice, I offer the following observations. Renaissance German did not have a standardized orthography. The same word could be spelled in a variety of ways, and that seemed to be acceptable as long as it was recognizable. Philipp (Philip? Phillipp?) von Hutten signed his letters inconsistently, though he never wavered in the spelling of his last name. I assume that the pronunciation of words was not as variable. With increasing practice in reading Hutten, I began to sense that if I could hear him speak, he would sound more familiar than he appears in writing. For example, the modern word “Zeitung” only refers to the physical object of a “newspaper.” In Hutten’s time, the word “Zeytung” retained its semantic proximity to the
English word “tiding.” In modern German, the sound of “ey” would rhyme with “hey,” whereas Hutten probably pronounced it to rhyme with “hi.” In other words, his spelling was more different than his speaking.

The analysis of text is an uncommon undertaking for an experimental psychologist. Experimental psychology is oriented toward the future, to designing experiments and to predict their outcomes before they occur (Dawes, 1988). Text analysis, however, is historical; it seeks to understand and explain by reconstruction that which has already happened. In this essay, I attempt to bridge the gap between these two epistemological approaches by applying concepts that arose in the context of experimental psychology to the interpretation of historical, autobiographical material (for a related approach, see Brams’s, 2011, reconstruction of historical and literary events through the lens of game theory). Though speculative, I offer my interpretations with caution and hope that both psychologists as well as historians might find them thought-provoking.

3. Narrative

Hutten’s first great Entrada or expedition into the interior of Venezuela under Hohermuth von Speyer lasted three years (1535–1538). Its object was to find gold and enslave Indians. The latter seemed easier than the former. Von Hutten recorded many of his experiences and observations in a trave-ologue “Newe Zeytung” or “New Tidings.” Several of his letters to his friends and family have also survived.

Von Hutten must have been astounded by the native population. He described them as “a bare, naked, and bestial population, but in all their evil almost cunning, walking about naked, barefoot and bareheaded, the women covering their privates with a piece of cloth behind and in front, rather like a bath maid.”

Over the course of 12 years in the country, von Hutten learned much about the natives and his writings reflect a variety of impressions and attitudes. At times, when the capture of natives was the order of the day, he referred to them as “pieces” to be counted, a usage characteristic of the slave trade. At other times, he referred to them as human beings. He noticed differences in their attitudes toward “Christians” (i.e., Europeans), ranging from bellicosity to submissiveness to collaboration. A recurring theme is that it was the natives who supplied the intelligence with regard to where gold was to be found, namely on the other side of the mountains.

And there is the hitch. Hohermuth’s expedition, being on horseback, did not manage to find a mountain pass that would take them to Bogotá, to the
land of the gold-working Muisca culture. Hohermuth’s force, with von Hutten in it, moved along the eastern slope of the Cordilleras without being able to cross over into the Andean plateaus. One can only speculate about the frustration the expeditionaries must have felt at being so close and yet so far.

The year they returned to Coro on the Venezuelan coast, another German expedition under Nicolaus Federmann reached the Colombian highlands via the 4,810 meter high Páramo de Suma pass. To their dismay, Federmann and his men found the Muisca lands despoiled and their riches looted. A Spanish expedition under Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada (1509–1579) had beaten them to the punch by one year. Von Hutten expressed great respect for Federmann; yet, had he joined his expedition, it would not have mattered in the end.

The failure to seize the native gold when there was a chance could have been – and perhaps should have been – the end of the German effort to conquer this corner of South America. For von Hutten in particular, this could have been the time to sail home. His family pleaded with him to return and start a family of his own. There was some urgency because they feared for his well-being and they depended on him to pass on the Hutten name. His brothers could not do so. Moritz von Hutten was a bishop and his brother Wilhelm’s ill wife could not conceive. To induce Philipp to return, his family even offered to pay his debts.

And debts he had. Hutten writes: “What has been my booty from this long and debilitating journey is that I was wounded for the third time by Indians and have lost two horses, which put me in great debt. Lately, a horse has been sold for 800 Pesos.” Prophetically, he concludes that “God willing, this land or my body must pay.”

Hutten declined his family’s entreaties and pleaded with them not to see him as being disobedient. When Hohermuth died in 1540, he was appointed Interim Governor of the territory and he began to outfit a second expedition. This second Entrada lasted five years and ended in complete failure, at least if measured against its stated objectives. From a contemporary point of view, however, we can marvel at Hutten’s ability to venture into the reaches of the Upper Orinoco basin, 250 years before Humboldt. While von Hutten was away from Venezuela’s administrative center, Juan de Carvajal usurped the Governorship with forged papers. He captured von Hutten and his companions as they were headed back to the coast, put them in chains, and then had them beheaded (Schmitt & Simmer, 1999). Although von Hutten could not anticipate this outcome, the question remains why he undertook the second expedition when there must have been little hope of success. This is a psychological puzzle, and contemporary theory and research.
on human judgment and decision-making may shed some light on how Hutten reached his fateful decision to stay in South America.

4. Analysis

Hutten had two strong reasons not to mount a second expedition: First, the first expedition had been arduous, costly, and unsuccessful. Its lesson could have been, and arguably should have been, that expeditions of this type were condemned to fail. Second, the main source of gold – the Muisca culture – was depleted, and there was no good evidence of a second Muisca yet untapped. In hindsight, there is little doubt as to what Hutten should have done. Since Hutten chose to stay and press on with his mission, and since he was neither stupid nor insane, we must ask which reasons were strong enough to override the decision to go home.

Cognitive psychology teaches that ordinary and even very smart people are susceptible to certain cognitive illusions (Pohl, 2004) that can mar rational decision-making. One well-documented fallacy of thought is the selective gathering and interpretation of information (Fischer, Aydin, Fischer, Frey, & Lea, 2012), which can lead to overconfidence in decision-making (Hoffrage, 2004). Hutten’s writings show, however, that he was not blind to the long odds he was facing. In fact, he wrote that Europeans judging the conquest from a distance failed to appreciate the fact that many expeditions fail. He knew that becoming a Cortés or Pizarro requires a lot of luck (see Kahneman, 2011, or Rosenzweig, 2007, for the psychology of success). Hutten writes about “how much hard labor and danger it takes to win the riches and how many thousands of Christians lose their lives in the Indies, and how so many Armadas are lost before a Peru is found.”

If Hutten did not have a biased view of his prospects for success, what was it that kept him going? The record affords two psychological inferences, one of which is amply corroborated by Hutten’s letters, the other more speculative. One powerful consideration that played into von Hutten’s decision-making was his concern for honor. He repeatedly referred to the traditional knightly code of honor that demanded not to shrink from a challenge. More importantly, honor was so bound up with documented material success that returning poor and in debt would have been intolerable.

The code of honor was an internalized concern with reputation. Hutten writes that “I would be dissatisfied with myself and condemn myself every day. People out there may be convinced that anyone who sails out to the Indies will come back rich, and if they do not it must be because of their own personal flaw or failure.” He is adamant “that no one shall have the oppor-
tunity to mock me.” He leaves no doubt that he would not be able to shake the yoke of lost honor. “I would spend the rest of my life in sadness and agitation of spirit and would not enjoy one happy day.”

Hutten’s words express the dark side of honor, namely the prospect of shame in case of failure. The avoidance of shame thus becomes a motivating factor that is psychologically at least as potent as naked ambition. Contemporary research shows that men in cultures of honor are particularly prone to respond aggressively to reputational threats (Nisbett & Cohen, 1996), and, more intriguingly, are prone to take risks that are considered unreasonable elsewhere. To prove their strength and fearlessness, men in cultures of honor are more tolerant of risk than men elsewhere, and as a consequence have higher incidents of accidental death (Barnes, Brown, & Tamborski, 2012).

On a related though more speculative note, we can surmise that von Hutten’s predicament amounted to a problem of sunk cost (Arkes & Blumer, 1985). Having already invested much in the project in terms of time, resources and lives, he might have figured that persistence could somehow redeem earlier losses. Basing decisions on past investments instead of future prospects is a cognitive fallacy. Losing more lives in the future does not make past deaths less futile. Throwing good money after bad only leads to a larger pile of bad money. In modern times, the Vietnam war and other protracted military adventures are tragic examples of this sort of thinking. Human nature has not changed much over 20 generations, and so von Hutten was perhaps victimized by the same psychological forces that plague modern generals and investors.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the sunk cost fallacy in its pure form is difficult to demonstrate (Arkes & Ayton, 1999; Krueger, Evans, & Goldin, 2011). For such a demonstration to be successful, it must be shown that the decision maker is certain that the project will fail even if additional investments are made. What matters is subjective certainty, not objective certainty. Von Hutten expressed, and probably believed, that there remained a small possibility that success could be wrested from impending disaster. In such a situation many people choose to gamble. Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman puts it like this in his recent book Thinking, fast and slow (pp. 318-319): “Many unfortunate human situations unfold [in this manner]. This is where people who face very bad options take desperate gambles, accepting a high probability of making things worse in exchange for a small hope of avoiding a large loss. Risk taking of this kind often turns manageable failure into disasters. The thought of accepting the large sure loss is too painful and the hope of complete relief too enticing to make the sensible decision that it is time to cut one’s losses.”
Still, von Hutten was a sane man. He used information and evidence at his disposal, and he was aware of the probabilistic element in the course of events. Indeed, he anticipated that conflict with other Europeans might be the greatest threat to him. “I fear war with the Christians more than with the Indians. We will run into other Christian expeditions and perhaps not be able to part without conflict.” Hutten was also a sensitive man. His writings show self-reflection, the ability of taking the perspective of others, and emotional attachment to his family.

5. Conclusion

With Hutten’s death, the age of the conquistadors came to an end. The colonization and exploitation of the Americas became more bureaucratic and methodical, leaving less room for adventurers in search of gold and honor. We can only speculate whether Hutten was motivated by considerations beyond what we see in the surviving documents. Carvajal destroyed most of the written notes and observations Hutten had kept during his second expedition. Schmitt and F. K. von Hutten (1999) bemoan the loss of this authentic material, which, had it survived, might have “established Philipp’s fame and fortune during his lifetime more effectively than the most successful Entrada” (p. 40, my translation). If von Hutten shared this view, his decision to stay in Venezuela may be less puzzling after all.

Two and a half centuries after Hutten, another German set foot on the coast of South America. He explored the continent with a thirst for knowledge, observing, measuring, recording, and collecting everything in sight. This was Alexander von Humboldt. The South Americans say he was the second discoverer of their continent. If history could act with intention, one might say that Philipp von Hutten was a promissory note that Alexander von Humboldt would come.

References

Zusammenfassung

Summary

During the early 16th century, Philipp von Hutten spent twelf years in Venezuela trying to find gold and glory. After one expedition failed, he mounted another. At the time, the evidence was quite clear that this too would fail. Why did von Hutten press on? This essay considers this question from a psychological perspective, using surviving documents from Hutten as its source. The main conclusion is that von Hutten’s aristocratic but medieval sense of honor kept him from accepting failure. Furthermore, this persistence in the face of impossibly long odds can be seen as an example of the so-called ‘sunk cost fallacy,’ or throwing good money after bad.